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SUBJECT Segment III: Inside the CIA

DAVID BRINKLEY: The Central Intelligence Agency feels it has been ground down like a nutmeg: its Director fired, its secrets exposed, its wrongdoing splashed across the press, and now hundreds of its staff members fired. The CIA is, therefore, said to be demoralized and uncertain of its future.

Ford Rowan, looking inside the CIA, reports on what he has found.

FORD ROWAN: This is the nerve center of the Central Intelligence Agency, an agency nervous about its future. This is where the CIA keeps track of what's going on in the world. Reports from America's spies, translations of foreign radio broadcasts, and cables from military and diplomatic posts flown here, to the CIA's Operations Center.

NBC News was permitted to look behind the locked doors at a crucial time of change in the CIA. We found turmoil.

In the wake of disclosures about what it has done -- domestic spying, drug experiments, assassination plots -- there's new uncertainty about where the agency is headed.

Much of the unhappiness stems from the "Halloween Massacre." That's what CIA officers are calling the mass firings of October 31st. Some 212 clandestine operatives were fired. In all, 820 positions are being cut by Director Stansfield Turner.

ADMIRAL STANSFIELD TURNER: We've got more fat, we've got more overhead than we can afford. And I want to be sure that every employee out there is fully challenged and has a really demanding job. And that's what we're getting down to: lean and

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mean.

ROWAN: The firings are eliminating the old leadership of the clandestine service and raising questions about how the agency will operate in the future. It's causing unprecedented dissension in the ranks.

After hours, one CIA employee showed us his dismissal notice and said, "It's a purge of the old hands." A CIA officer who quit said the loss of key people could destroy contacts with foreign sources. Another said the cutbacks could convince foreigners not to trust the CIA.

JOHN MAURI (?): I'm sure they're being jeopardized.

ROWAN: John Mauri, a former CIA officer who once served as an assistant secretary of Defense, is concerned about the changes.

MAURI: The institution is bound to grind down to a pretty slow pace, because people are worried about their jobs, they don't want to take initiative, they don't want to show imagination, they don't want to take chances. Everybody's running scared. And in an intelligence business, why, you can't afford to have a lot of timid fellows there, because it's not a game for timid fellows.

ROWAN: While the clandestine operatives are being cut, these jobs are not in danger. These are CIA analysts. They are at work on America's most exclusive newspaper, the NID, the National Intelligence Daily, a top secret news summary published by the CIA.

Each morning, the paper is put into envelopes, sealed, placed in a locked briefcase, and delivered to top officials at the White House and throughout the government. The circulation is very limited. Only about 125 officials receive the secret news.

Some people think this is the part of the CIA that needs beefing up, because in the past it hasn't measured up.

Congressman Otis Pike chaired the 1975 House Intelligence Committee investigation of the CIA.

REP. OTIS PIKE: I was personally appalled, and I think the members of our committee were very unhappy.

ROWAN: Pike and his committee concluded that the CIA's analysts failed to anticipate the timing and the intensity of the Tet offensive in the Vietnam War, that the CIA failed to warn of the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia, that the CIA failed to predict Egypt's invasion of Israel in 1973, that the CIA was caught napping by the 1974 revolution in Portugal, that the CIA failed to forecast the coup in Cyprus.

REP. PIKE: They had just blown it on these very important events.

ROWAN: An official of the CIA, who did not want to be identified, said, "It's not all that bad."

MAN: I think we've been right more often than we've been wrong. We've been wrong on some lulus. There's no question about that. But on the whole, I think we have been much more right than we have been wrong.

ROWAN: Perhaps so. But there is a new emphasis on analysis, a shift away from clandestine operations, such as military activities, covert actions and espionage. Human spies are gradually being replaced by technology.

Deep inside the CIA, they are keeping watch on what the Russians are doing in space. Spy planes and satellites monitor the earth. In the past, they mainly watched military targets, but now they also monitor economic, agricultural, energy, and industrial activities.

Work goes on inside the CIA, but the cutbacks, changes, and tensions have taken their toll.

Ray Cline, a former Deputy Director, thinks the problems have hurt the CIA's performance.

RAY CLINE: The percentage of falloff from a good performance, a perfect performance is very hard to estimate, but I would say at least 50%.

ROWAN: This is not a covert action; it's just a hobby after hours at the CIA. The real combat is behind the scenes, where the future of the CIA and its clandestine service is being decided.